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AUTHOR Schon, Isabel
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ABSTRACT

The article discusses nine detrimental and six distinguished books about Hispanic people and cultures, published since 1979 for young readers. It is suggested that many recent books that depict Hispanic people and cultures repeat the same stereotypes, misconceptions and insensibilities that were prevalent in books published in the 1960s and early 1970s. The books that are considered detrimental contain such themes as the poverty of Mexican people, a Cuban girl's embarrassment about her background, distorted narratives of pre-Columbian history, and exaggerated and/or simplistic discussions of serious problems of Latin America. The books that are considered distinguished, on the other hand, tell about the joys, wisdom, and fantasy of Hispanic people as well as the beauties of ancient cities in Peru and the works of Hispanic poets and performers. The nine detrimental books are: "One Mexican Sunday" (Mike Oehler), "Home for a Stranger" (Joan Talmage Weiss), "Luisa's American Dream" (Claudia Mills), "Maybe Next Summer" (Don Schellie), "Growing Up in Aztec Times" and "Growing Up in Inca Times" (Brenda Ralph Lewis), "Beyond the Andes: My Search for the Origins of Pre-Inca Civilization" (Pino Turolla), "Puerto Rico, Island between Two Worlds" (Lila Perl), and "Revolutionary Cuba" (Terence Cannon). The six distinguished books are: "Cuentos: Tales from the Hispanic Southwest" (Jose Griego y Maestas), "Chileno!" (Antonio Skarmenta), "Lost City in the Clouds: The Discovery of Machu Picchu" (Elizabeth Gemming), "A Journey to Cuzco" (Mary Ruth Myers), "Alicia and Her Ballet Nacional de Cuba" (Walter Terry), and "The Dream below the Sun: Selected Poems" (Antonio Machado). (NQA)

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RECENT DETRIMENTAL AND DISTINGUISHED BOOKS ABOUT HISPANIC PEOPLE AND CULTURES

By

Isabel Schon

Tempe, Arizona

Fall, 1981

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Recent Detrimental and Distinguished Books about Hispanic People and Cultures

Isabel Schon

EVEN THOUGH there have been several critical articles in the past months about books for young readers that depict Hispanic people and cultures, it seems to me that many people—authors, editors, publishers—are not getting the obvious message: The overwhelming majority of recent books incessantly repeat the same stereotypes, misconceptions, and insensibilities that were prevalent in the books published in the 1960s and the early 1970s. The following books published since 1979 insist on the same themes: the unbelievable poverty of Mexican people, a Cuban girl who is embarrassed about her background, distorted narratives of pre-Columbian history, and exaggerated and/or simplistic discussions of serious problems of Latin America. Fortunately, too, there are several recent distinguished books that tell about the joys, tribulations, wisdom, and fantasy of Hispanic people; about the beauties of ancient cities in Peru; and about the well-known Cuban dancer Alicia Alonso. There is also a new bilingual collection of one of Spain's great poets.

Just to emphasize my point one more time, I will discuss the books that I consider detrimental first, and later I will express my opinion of the books that I consider distinguished.

Detrimental Books

One Mexican Sunday by Mike Oehler is another American author's view of life among very poor Mexican rural people. Oehler narrates in a sometimes witty but mostly brazen manner his experiences in a destitute Mexican village forty miles south of the U.S. border. Apparently, the six months that this author lived in Mexico helped him become "aware of a new peacefulness" (p.108), and perhaps this is a good thing; but his descriptions of Mexican people are simplistic if not utterly absurd. He tells of wetbacks who "always get caught and always crossed again" (p.61); of an undesirable alien who was deported from Arizona "because of too much fighting, drinking, gambling, and too many conquests of other men's wives" (p.70); of Mexican prostitutes who prefer Americans as customers: "Not only can they be talked into paying well above the

Dr. Schon is associate professor of library science at Arizona State University, Tempe.

prevailing scale and buying expensive drinks, but they are cleaner for they have access to bathrooms with plumbing and have probably taken a hot soapy shower sometime in the past several days—something which is difficult and expensive for most Mexicans" (p.83); and of Manuel who "has to have sex. . . . Two weeks without a woman is utter hell. Give him cramps in the belly. . . ." (p.83). He also narrates his perceptions of Mexican "chaperons," and of American tourists in Mexico in his attempts to interpret "life in Mexico." Ludicrous black-and-white illustrations complement this whimsical version of life in rural Mexico.

Home for a Stranger by Joan Talmage Weiss is a disgustingly patronizing story about Juana, a young girl who does not know anything about herself; she only knows the dirty orphanage in Mexico where she lives; where all the children had lice in their hair (" 'The only way to get rid of the lice is to burn down the orphanage. . . . They [the lice] were inside our mattresses and the blankets on our beds' " (p.6); and where no one paid attention to her ugly scar. Coincidentally, a doctor from California takes a strong interest in helping Juana; he takes her to his home and makes arrangements for Juana's needed surgery. In California Juana is presented as a savage who needs to be civilized: she eats like an animal, she breaks the TV set, she ruins mamma's favorite azalea bush, she gets her first toothbrush and must be taught how to use it, and other similar incidents in which Juana must learn to adjust to the United States with "all its clean California grass and houses and flowers" (p.83). The reader is constantly reminded of life in Mexico where there are many poor people, where Juana only ate "tortillas or frijoles."

Weiss endeavors to tell a story about Juana's transition to a new world and a new culture. Unfortunately, the author only knows about the poverty in Mexico and about kind and caring people in the United States. With this she proceeds to tell an incredible story that insults every aspect of Mexican culture. This obvious lack of sensitivity should be apparent to all readers.

Another demeaning, shallow story about a fourteen-year-old Hispanic girl (Cuban in this case) who is utterly embarrassed about her background and who meets the "perfect" WASP boy is *Luisa's American Dream* by Claudia Mills. As is to be expected in stories of this type, everything in Luisa's background identifies her with "undesirable" Hispanic characteristics such as: "They still spoke Spanish at home, even though it had been ten whole years since they left Cuba. . . ." (p.2); "Luisa's mother was certainly fat—at five-foot-two she weighed a good hundred and seventy pounds" (p.2). And, obviously, Luisa "hated being Cuban" on page 10 and on page 16 she felt "shame about being Spanish and poor."

Luisa and her friends develop an incredible plan in which she ends up dating Travis, a handsome, wealthy WASP boy. After a few dates with lots of kisses, some marijuana smoking, and many lies about her background, Luisa begins to examine her feelings about the people who truly love her. She finally concludes that "she wouldn't trade Mami and Papi for anyone else's parents—and she wouldn't trade being Cuban either" (p. 145). Stereotyped stories of this type are definitely annoying; they

insist on superficially comparing "distasteful" Hispanic attitudes with "sophisticated" WASP customs. And, after insipid resolutions, the hero/heroine discovers who they really are. The stories are, therefore, neither entertaining nor insightful.

The difficult issue of illegal migration of Mexicans into the United States is, unfortunately, described through notorious facts and dubious studies in *Maybe Next Summer* by Don Schellie. Seventeen-year-old Matt Althaus is eager to learn about the newspaper business, so he takes a summer job working on the *Crandall (Ariz.) Daily Chronicle*. There he meets a beautiful blond, Shannon, who happens to be the daughter of his father's best friend. The stage is set for an engrossing story that includes a romantic yet innocent relationship between Shannon and Matt, an interesting depiction of journalistic life, and the complex issue of smuggling illegal Mexicans into the U.S. Matt's investigation of an illegal alien smuggling operation is the central theme of this story, which the author attempts to account for in questionable statements. For instance, Matt explains to Shannon about the number of illegal aliens living and working in the U.S.: " 'One study says that 10 percent of the entire population of Mexico is now in the United States illegally. Think of it—one out of every ten Mexicans' " (p.83). One wonders why the author did not question facts such as these; or did he not consider that the population of Mexico is now more than 70 million? Does he truly believe that there could possibly be more than 7 million Mexicans living illegally in the U.S.? And yet, he repeatedly seems to be sympathetic toward them: "You couldn't really blame them for wanting to better their living conditions. Who wouldn't want to make as much in an hour in the U.S. as he had been earning in a whole day in his own country?" (p.79). This is a well-written story with appealing characters that, unfortunately, reflects popular thinking in the Southwest: "A lot of Mexican people who can't get permission to immigrate into the United States legally just jump the fence or slit it and sneak into this country" (p.24). This is an extreme simplification of a most perplexing problem for both the U.S. and Mexico.

Brenda Ralph Lewis has written two narratives about pre-Columbian cultures which can be used as examples of books that perpetuate a definite lack of appreciation of the true achievements of these cultures through an overabundance of opinionated misconceptions: *Growing Up in Aztec Times* has so many things that I found objectionable that I hope no young reader will get his/her information about the Aztecs from it. First of all, there is the ever-present emphasis on the Aztec practice of human sacrifice. On thirteen different occasions throughout the book, the author describes how the "savage" Aztecs "behaved like barbarians" and "because of their ferocious nature" sacrificed human beings to their gods. (Even the illustration on the book cover shows a human sacrifice.) In addition, the author is terribly judgmental about various aspects of Aztec life. For example, she states that Aztec discipline was "unbelievably strict, even sadistic" (p.15) and that it was "so harsh that it was almost like torture" (p.21). Then she devotes one chapter to the explanation of why the Aztecs "acted like all superstitious people." She states that "the Aztecs

were intensely superstitious, and believed in all kinds of spirits, magic, witchcraft and sorcery" (p.45). Furthermore, there are several misspelled names of people and places and misstatements regarding other pre-Columbian cultures and locations of well-known Mexican sites. Even most of the illustrations, which were taken from beautiful pre-Columbian codices, have lost their original beauty—the black-and-white reproductions are blurred and stale.

By constantly "interpreting" Incan habits and customs, and by comparing Incan civilization to European standards, Lewis pretends to introduce the Incas to young readers in *Growing Up in Inca Times*. This book does not, as the title mistakenly implies, tell what life was like for Incan children; rather it is a presumptuous narrative that repeats well-known aspects of the Incan empire with the author's annoying explanations. For instance, after briefly mentioning the great epic poems, she states: "We would find some of these poems quite grisly" (p.7). The following is Lewis' conclusion of Incan attitudes toward work: "All this might sound dismal, but it was quite reasonable in the circumstances" (p.25). And, after briefly describing Incan cures and practices, she states: "This may sound 'hocus-pocus' to us . . ."

The overall impression that the author gives the reader is that the Incas were very different, that they were highly developed in a few areas, but mainly that they had many peculiar customs, such as in her description of the duties of the Incas' Chosen Women: "Their duties included holding out their hands so that the Inca could spit into their palms if he had to clear his throat" (p.39). This is definitely not the way one should introduce the Incas to young readers.

Beyond the Andes: My Search for the Origins of Pre-Inca Civilization by Pino Turolla is a long, detailed narrative in which the author recounts his amazing personal adventures in searching for the origins of the early cultures of Peru and Mesoamerica. Turolla's hypothesis "that the very early cultures of the New World had originated in a belt along the equator" (p.112) takes him to remote regions of Ecuador and Venezuela in which he gets involved in strange and mysterious occurrences. He is impressed by the "Ecuadorians' indifference to their pre-Columbian history" (p.38) and by his use of the drug *ayahuasca*, which permanently altered his "spiritual awareness." This is the author's explanation: "How else, on my subsequent trips to the jungle, could I have come to understand the spiritual forces at work there, an understanding that helped me develop a depth of relationship and an influence with some of the Indian tribes that no white man has ever had before? It was 'ayahuasca' that released that power within me" (p.128). Readers might be enticed by the author's incredible adventures, which include close escapes, frustrations, and perplexing speculations "as to the age of man's arrival and the origin of his cultural rise in South America." Fortunately, readers will find much better illustrated books that describe archaeological discoveries from a much more scholarly perspective.

Puerto Rico, Island between Two Worlds by Lila Perl is a serious attempt to depict the economic, social, and political problems of Puerto Rico after briefly introducing the reader to the history, geography, and culture of

the island. In a direct, easy-to-understand style, the author describes the effects of the mixture of Spanish, Indian, and American influences on the Puerto Rican people. She includes important statistics regarding poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment as well as drug abuse and other social problems, which convey to the reader the seriousness of the problems confronting many Puerto Ricans today. The last chapter is a well-written discussion of the numerous issues involved regarding the political future of the island—commonwealth, state, or nation? However, the author is too simplistic in her proposed solutions for the complex agricultural problems of Puerto Rico and she seems to be unduly concerned about Puerto Ricans' "machismo." Her tourist-type black-and-white photographs add a human touch to the narrative.

Revolutionary Cuba by Terence Cannon is an interesting book about Cuba, if only because it presents a rosy, one-sided picture of the Cuban Revolution. The author used "Cuban books, magazines, archives, material from interviews with Cubans, and personal experiences to reconstruct" the *official* Cuban opinion about the successes and problems of the Revolution. The author differs from U.S. "State Department analysts, and scholars with an anti-Cuban point of view" and proceeds to describe numerous "hostile acts" committed by the United States against Cuba since the nineteenth century. He explains Cuba's "support of guerrilla wars against imperialism" as well as Cuba's system of political leadership which is only possible "in a society where the major causes of conflict of interests have been eliminated" (p.252). The author describes a society where everyone lives and works for the benefit of others, where there is no ambition "as they are all humble, down to the littlest" (p.209), and where everyone is equal. In addition, he briefly states plausible excuses for the problems that Cuba has experienced in agriculture and other aspects of its economy.

This book represents the official Cuban point of view about Cuba today and, as such, it might serve to balance collections that are lacking in offering a sympathetic perspective of Castro's Cuba. It is not, however, an objective or scholarly presentation of Cuba's history or economic development.

Distinguished Books

Cuentos: Tales from the Hispanic Southwest by Jose Griego y Maestas is a delightful bilingual (Spanish and English) collection of twenty-three stories, legends, and myths of the Hispanic culture of New Mexico and southern Colorado. The wit, wisdom, fantasy, and joy displayed in these tales of animals, witchcraft, magic, and events of everyday life in the Hispanic villages of the Southwest will amuse readers of all ages and backgrounds. Rudolfo A. Anaya has taken discreet artistic liberties in his English translations of these tales, yet he has beautifully maintained the core and clarity of the original Spanish versions. Unlike many preposterous books in English about Hispanic people and cultures, these tales provide an authentic view of Hispanic ingenuity and charm. Ingenuous black-and-white illustrations add to the unaffected enjoyment of these tales.

Chileno! by the Chilean author Antonio Skármeta, is the story of Lucho, a fourteen-year-old boy, and his Chilean family who are political refugees in Berlin after the 1973 military coup that overthrew Allende. The family's experiences in a foreign country are touchingly described. Lucho's parents have problems with money and the German language. Lucho, nicknamed Chileno, must adjust to growing up in a new culture and he relates, with simple honesty, his thoughts about girls, fights, friends, and his parents. The interest of the reader is heightened by Lucho's involvement in an unwanted fistfight with a big German boy in which he miraculously comes off the winner. Besides Lucho's personal joys and tribulations, readers will be impressed by the strong personal feelings that Allende aroused in many Chileans as well as the difficult political circumstances that prevail in Chile.

Ancient Peru serves as the background for two books that could be used as good introductions to the remarkable Incan civilization: *Lost City in the Clouds: The Discovery of Machu Picchu* by Elizabeth Gemming is the story of Hiram Bingham's astonishing discovery of the "lost city in the clouds," which he named Machu Picchu. The author worked from Bingham's own descriptions and thus describes with genuine amazement the spectacular monuments and achievements of the Incas. Through passages of fictional dialogue, the author interjects important episodes of Incan history as well as exciting aspects of Professor Bingham's investigations in Peru in the early 1900s. Unfortunately, though, the thirteen black-and-white line illustrations do not convey to the reader/viewer the majestic grandeur of Machu Picchu and its surroundings.

A Journey to Cuzco by Mary Ruth Myers is a fascinating story of suspense, intrigue, murder, and romance set amid the imposing background of Machu Picchu and the narrow sidewalks of Cuzco. Libby Krier is young, independent, and anxious to find out about her archaeologist father, whom she had never known. Upon receiving a terse message from him, she travels to Peru, where she is immediately kidnapped and informed that her father has been murdered. Libby feels compelled to protect her father's archaeological discovery and to deliver his last message. Her exciting experiences in ancient Peruvian cities are fast-paced as well as engrossing, and the cast of strong characters provides a realistic support to Libby's predicaments in a foreign country. It is indeed refreshing to read about the allure of Machu Picchu and to see it compared "to the pyramids, the Parthenon, the Coliseum," (p.41) even if it is only the background to a contemporary novel about an American girl.

Ballet devotees and admirers of the great Cuban prima ballerina will thoroughly enjoy *Alicia and Her Ballet Nacional de Cuba* by Walter Terry. The author, a well-known dance critic, emphasizes Alicia's involvement with the Ballet Nacional de Cuba. The book includes excellent black-and-white photos of Alicia in her youth, as well as rehearsal scenes and scenes of well-known ballets performed by Alicia and members of the Ballet Nacional. There are a few references to Alicia's personal life, and the author's extensive knowledge of ballet comes through as he describes great ballet performances in which Alicia performed in the U.S. and

ultimately in Cuba. It also includes interesting accounts of ballet training and education in Cuba today.

Sophisticated students and poetry lovers will delight in *The Dream below the Sun: Selected Poems* by Antonio Machado. This is a bilingual collection of 150 poems of Spain's great poet of "the generation of '98." It includes a brief but interesting introduction written by John Dos Passos and an insightful reminiscence by Juan Ramón Jiménez. The translator, Willis Barnstone, has succeeded in maintaining Machado's somber moods as well as his "dry, spare and luminous" language in the English version.

Ever since I wrote my two bibliographies (*A Bicultural Heritage*[1] and *A Hispanic Heritage*[2]), I have often wished that sometime soon young readers in the United States would be exposed to many more distinguished books about Hispanic peoples and cultures. Unfortunately, the selection of recent books is still not very favorable. Librarians must exert themselves in selecting only those books that offer an authentic and sensitive portrayal of Hispanic peoples and cultures, thereby avoiding books that perpetuate the unfortunate misconceptions and negative impressions that are so common in the United States about many aspects of Hispanic life and history.

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